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ABSTRACT

To establish a baseline for comparison of the goals of the "Writing to Read" (WTR) program--a computer-based instructional system designed to develop the writing and reading skills of kindergarten and first grade students, a study evaluated WTR in the Kettering City Schools in Ohio. The study examined six areas related to the program: (1) a 1987-1988 first grade student questionnaire focusing on attitudes about WTR; (2) a parent questionnaire soliciting opinions about WTR; (3) a survey of 1987-1988 first grade teachers participating in WTR; (4) a comparison of reading and language scores from the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills, administered to second grade students who participated in the program and to those who did not; (5) a comparison of ratings on Competency Based Writing samples given to first and second grade students who had and had not participated in WTR in the Kettering City Schools; and (6) a comparison writing sample for eight classes--four first grade and four second grade. Two classes at each grade level participated in the program. Results indicated that students liked the different stations in the WTR room; parents thought that WTR should become a permanent program; teachers felt that WTR helped students produce creative stories and increased reading and writing vocabularies; and significant differences existed (both in the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills and in writing sample comparisons) between second grade students who had participated in the program in first grade and those who had not. (MM)

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Summary of the Report on the Review of the Writing to Read Program as Implemented in The Kettering City Schools in the 1986-1987 and 1987-1988 School Years

June 21, 1988

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I. Purpose and Scope of the Formative Evaluation Study

The purpose of this formative evaluation study was to establish a baseline for comparison of the goals of the Writing to Read program as it has been implemented in the Kettering City Schools. This study examined six different areas related to the Writing to Read program. AREA ONE represented the 1987-1988 first grade students' response to a questionnaire focused on their attitudes and feelings about Writing to Read as they experienced it during the school year. AREA TWO focused on the responses of parents to a questionnaire soliciting their opinions about Writing to Read <WTR> based on the information they received through the school and from their children. AREA THREE was a survey of the 1987-1988 first grade teachers participating in Writing to Read. AREA FOUR represented a comparison of the reading and language scores from the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills administered to second grade students in the winter of 1988. This student group represented a comparison sample between a group of students that participated in Writing to Read during the 1986-1987 school year and a group of students that did not participate in the Writing to Read program. AREA FIVE was a comparison of the ratings on the Competency Based Writing samples given to first and second grade students in the Kettering City Schools in the spring of 1988. Two groups are represented in this rating comparison, e.e. those studnets who participated in the Writing to Read program and those who did not. In addition to the competency based ratings, the writing samples were examined for fluency, i.e. the number of words produced per sample. AREA SIX was a comparison writing sample for eight intact classes, four first grade classes and four second grade classes. Two classes at each grade level participated in the Writing to Read program while the other two classes did not participate.

II. Overview of the Writing to Read Program as Implemented in Kettering

The Writing to Read program is a computer based instructional system designed to develop the writing and reading skills of kindergarten and first grade students. Some of the features listed as learning outcomes for students are as follows (Butzin, 1984):

In the Writing system, students are able to...

A. learn the alphabetic principle, which lets them write anything they can say.
B. use the computer, which acts as a guide or tutor.
C. feel in command of the computer.
D. discover the joy of language.
E. develop their ability to express their ideas and to manipulate English language.

According to John Martin, one of the founders of Writing to Read, writing skills developed by students lead them to reading. In this program students combine sounds and the representative letters that stand for sounds into words that they know through their speaking vocabulary. The reading act for these writers involved reading the words, sentences, and stories that they have written. Writing becomes a part of listening, reading, speaking, i.e. interpersonal communication. Accordingly, Writing to Read progresses logically from what the students can say to what the students can write and read.

Martin and Friedbert (1986) stated that students enter school as primary verbal communicators with a speaking vocabulary of more than 2000 words. Students can become active participants in learning through writing and reading their phonemic spelling system. These students also learn better and retain more when a multisensory approach is used in the learning process. Students have more success when the program is designed around the way they learn. Students also learn better when they are reinforced in a variety of different ways by peers, teachers, and parents.

This bridge between speaking to writing promotes the students' understanding of the language system and thus communication. Chomsky (1971) and Reed (1971) stated that the progression to reading through writing is a natural developmental sequence. The Writing to Read software used with IBM computers helps students work through sequenced, self-paced computer cycles designed to teach letter-sound relationships (Spillman and Lutz, 1986). The Writing to Read program is organized around five major work stations. These centers are as follow:

Computer Station: This station provides the initial instruction on the letter-sound relationship

Work Journal Station: At this station students practice the letter-sound relationships in addition to making words related to these letters.

Writing/Typing Station: Students write/type/word process stories that they wrote.

Listening Library: Students listen to tapes of books on a variety of topics.

Make Words Station: This station has a variety of different learning activities related to letter sounds and words.

As Writing to Read is implemented in three elementary schools in the Kettering City School district, students spend approximately an hour in the "Writing to Read Room" circulating among the five stations every fifteen to twenty minutes. These schools, Beavertown, Kennedy, and Southdale, have acted as pilot sites for the program during the 1986-1987 and 1987-1988 school years. First graders and kindergarten students were involved in the program during these years.

Students are encouraged to create stories without emphasis on the traditional aspects of spelling. Children freely compose stories, and during the revision process correct spelling may be emphasized. Computers in the Writing to Read program serve as both motivators and initiators of the writing experience in addition to being drill master, monitor, reward giver and diagnostician for the students. The teacher is able to guide the students and give them encouragement, assistance in composing as well as thinking about ideas to incorporate in their stories (Spillman and Lutz, 1986). This approach is called LANGUAGE-EXPERIENCE, i.e. anything students can write about, they can also read. Through this multisensory process in the Writing to Read program, students gain more confidence in their own ability to write, spell, and read.

III. Conclusions

The conclusions from this baseline formative study of Writing to Read in the Kettering Schools is as follows:

A. AREA ONE: Reponses from first grade students 1987-1988

The students in general liked the different stations in the Writing to Read room. They preferred using the word processor, writing table, the computer station, and the make words station.

B. AREA TWO: Responses from the parents 1986-1987 and 1987-1988

Parents in general expressed the opinion that Writing to Read should become a permanent program in the Kettering Schools, i.e. 90% of the parents in 1986-1987 and 94% of the parents in 1987-1988 expressed this opinion based on their observations of their children in the Writing to Read program.

C. AREA THREE: First Grade Teacher Responses for the 1987-1988 school year

In general the teachers felt that Writing to Read helped the students produce creative stories, increase reading and writing vocabularies, and helped the students see the relationship between reading and writing. There were some scheduling problems that need to be resolved at the individual sites. Teachers also questioned the order and presentation of several of the sounds and words in the program.

D. AREA FOUR: Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills for Second Grade Students (1987-1988)

Significant statistical differences were found between the second grade students who had WTR as first graders and those who did not have WTR as first graders. The subtests related to word attack skills, vocabulary, reading comprehension, spelling, language mechanics, and language expression indicated that students who had WTR as first graders performed better than the students who had not had WTR as first graders. In this section of the study the students' ability was held constant so the differences seen between the WTR and NWTR groups was not due to differences in ability of the groups.

E. AREA FIVE: Writing Sample Comparisons for 1986-1987 and 1987-1988

The results of this study indicated that students who had experienced WTR achieved a highter rating on the competency based writing sample and produced more words in completing these samples. The production of more words indicated the aspect of fluency related to writing, i.e. one of the goals of the Writing to Read program.

F. AREA SIX: Comparison of the First and Second Grade Students on Two Writing Samples

The results of this comparison were mixed. The WTR first and second grade students showed some differences in comparison with the NWTR students. The measures used in this study were quantitative rather than qualitative, so differences in writing style, theme, etc. were not assessed. In general the WTR first and second graders produced more words per sentence and more sentences per sample.

IV. Recommendations by AREA

AREA ONE: Student Responses to Writing to Read

The following recommendations are based on the information from the student questionnaire responses and on-site visits to the "Writing to Read rooms" at Beavertown, Kennedy, and Southdale elementary schools.

A. Teachers and aides at each of the sites should be encouraged to share information, materials, and management strategies for the various WTR stations.

B. Additional multisensory approaches could be developed to reinforce the traditional WTR materials.

C. Kindergarten and first graders have many similar needs in the WTR program. Kindergarten teachers and first grade teachers should be encouraged to share information.

D. This same type of a survey should be conducted during the 1988-1989 school year. It should include the first graders and kindergarteners. These results can be compared to the 1987-1988 school year.

AREA TWO: Parent Questionnaire Results

The majority of parents responding to the questionnaire in 1987 and 1988 stated they felt the Writing to Read program should become a permanent program in Kettering. The majority also felt that their children had been "turned on" to reading and writing through this program. Since this report represents a "baseline" formative evaluation effort for the Writing to Read program, the following recommendations are made.

A. The survey form should be sent to parents of 1987-1988 kindergarten students by July, 1988, to solicit their opinions on WTR.

B. The survey should be done during the 1988-1989 school year for all schools participating in WTR.

C. During the 1988-1989 school year a specified number of kindergarten and first grade parents should be randomly selected and interviewed about their child's progress and attitudes in the WTR program.

AREA THREE: First Grade WTR Responses

The first grade teachers responding to the questionnaire seemed to feel that the Writing to Read program has increased the students' ability to write and create stories. Some problems have been encountered with scheduling the WTR times with the other special activities. The following recommendations are made:

A. The principals and WTR teachers should meet to establish the range of WTR options available in the schools, i.e. beginnning and ending times based on student needs, WTR daily time allocations, etc.

B. This group could also establish a variety of individualized modifications within the WTR program to meet remediation and enrichment needs of the students.

AREA FOUR: Comparisons of CTBS Scores for WTR and NWTR Second Grade Students 1987-1988

The analysis of the second grade CTBS results comparing the students who had WTR in the first grade versus the students who didn't have WTR indicated that differences were apparent between these two groups when the CSI score <ability> was held constant. The following recommendations are made:

A. Formally assess a sample of WTR first grade students on WTR material, i.e. letter sound relationships, alphabet, and cycle words to see what was retained from kindergarten WTR, noting male/female differences.

B. Formally assess a sample of NWTR first grade students using the same assessment.

C. Conduct the CTBS survey again with second graders comparing WTR and NWTR students.

D. Select a sample of kindergarteners and first graders in WTR and NWTR schools to administer a learning modality test. Compare the progress of these students throughout the year using a qualitative format.

AREA FIVE: Comparison of Competency Based Writing Samples

The results of this study indicated that students who had WTR experience achieved a higher rating on the competency based writing sample and produced more words in completing this sample. The number of words produced represents a measure of fluency that relates to the objectives stated for the Writing to Read program. The mean rating on the competency based writing sample is related to the assessment used by the Kettering Schools to determine writing competency. The following recommendations are made:

A. Since this is a baseline formative study, the same study should be replicated during the 1988-1989 school year to determine if a difference actually exists between WTR and NWTR students in sample ratings and words produced.

B. If the replication of all or part of these results occurs, it insures that the difference between WTR and NWTR students is actually present.

AREA SIX: Comparison of First and Second Grade Classes on Two Writing Samples

The quantitative results of this section of the study were not clear cut. It is possible that these quantitative measures need to be supplemented by several qualitative ones. The recommendations are as follows:

A. Create a scoring stystem based on criteria similar to the ones used in the Competency Based Writing Sample.

B. Rescore a selected number of these writing samples using this qualitative set of criteria.

C. Administer two more writing samples to these selected WTR and NWTR students in these groups at the end of the 1988-1989 school year. This information provides a baseline to determine growth during the school year.

If the gains that are produced through Writing to Read that are related to writing fluency, joy of the language, etc. are to be maintained, an articulation must take place between the kindergarten and first grade WTR teachers and the other teachers in the primary unit.

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